

Some of you might know that Natalie and I have two pet rabbits. These are house rabbits, which means that they live indoors with us.

Over the last few weeks we have seen our bunnies grow increasingly happy. They were always pretty happy, as long as they had enough food and water and treats. But as they have become better friends and have been given more and more space to explore (including the living room) they have become visibly happier.

One of perhaps the best signs of this is the rabbit 'binky'. It is that little leg-flip hop that rabbits do when they simply cannot contain their happiness. It is the holy grail of behaviours for a rabbit owner. It means they are happy and relaxed and very pleased with their surroundings and their life. It is pure ecstatic, mad joy.

It is also one of those markers of spring - rabbits hopping through the green grass and lambs skipping through the fields. The sorts of care-free happinesses that tell us that we can shed the weight and darkness of winter and bask in the brilliant brightness of summer.

When we celebrate Easter we are celebrating that kind of carefree moment - when all the pain of mourning and loss is transformed into amazement and hope.

If you've ever been to a dawn service it's the moment when, huddled in a dark church we light all of the candles and turn on all the lights. Those cries of 'Allulia'

It is this joy and amazement that no doubt filled the meals the disciples shared with Jesus after his resurrection, that filled their hearts when they saw the resurrected Christ. "God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

They must have felt that need to pinch themselves and make sure that this really all is real.

This year, when we gather in Breinton Churchyard and worship side-by-side for the first time in several months there will be that same arm-pinching joy.

But I suspect there will be reservations too. Deep darkness and grief doesn't shed so easily - we are not as carefree as those binkyng bunnies or skipping lambs. Grief and upset clings to us, pain leaves wounds which aren't simply magiced away with good news.

Our reading from John reminds us how deep the disciples' grief was - not only are they grieving the loss of their friend and teacher. The man that they beloved would be king and saviour, even the Son of God, but they are shaken by the news that his body is gone.

Mary breaks the news to them 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'

They run to the tomb to confirm this - to see for themselves the horrible truth. One of them can't even bear to cross the threshold of the tomb - known to us as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved (and in tradition believed to be John) he stands on the threshold and falters.

Simon Peter is brave enough to venture in - to see the strangeness of folded and rolled up grave clothes and no body. He doesn't fully understand.

Bolstered by Simon Peter's presence the disciple whom Jesus loved steps in too - they are not alone in their grief and confusion. We are told he 'saw and believed' but we are not told what. We know that they 'they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.' Perhaps they have begun to believe that something bigger is happening, perhaps there are the first inklings of new faith. Perhaps they simply believe Mary's narrative - they certainly don't challenge her view of events.

In their grief and confusion they return home - perhaps unable to bear the sight, perhaps needing time to process, to mourn a new kind of loss.

They leave Mary alone at the tomb - still caught in that grief and confusion. Unlike the disciples she doesn't look away from that pain - doesn't return to the comfort of her home, to the arms of friends. She holds on in the midst of darkness and confusion.

It is in this darkest depths of grief that she looks into the tomb - perhaps desperately hoping that her eyes have deceived her, or perhaps in a maudlin way wanting to look on the very cause of her grief a while longer.

Sometimes, grief calls to us like that. We want to stare into the darkest depths and just be miserable, to be consumed by it, perhaps because we believe we deserve it, or owe it to somebody. Perhaps because we don't have the strength to pull ourselves up and out and it is easier just to give in.

So, weeping, Mary look into the tomb. And rather than seeing the painful sight, she saw 'two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.'

It's amazing, but it's also completely overwhelming. She cannot process what this means, when everything becomes too much we stumble from one thought to the next, only able to hold onto one thing at a time. Mary's grief blinds her to everything but itself - 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.'

Turning she sees a gardener, or at least what she takes to be a gardener. Still confused and raw and hurting her eyes are clouded to the truth. She cannot lift her head and see the miracle that is before her, the darkness of the grief and of Good Friday's events still cling to her.

It isn't until Jesus calls her name 'Mary' that she's able to lift her head from the darkness and the veil slips from her eyes.

She understands now that this is really Jesus, really the Son of God, really God before her. Risen and alive. We slip from the darkness of confusion into the brilliance of resurrection.

But, not quite. Those tendrils of anxiety and loss still cling to her, as she clings to Jesus. She cannot hold onto him here, in this place and this form, she cannot bind him to remain on earth with her, as if nothing had ever happened. He still has work to do, and she still has work to do.

It is a moment of arm-pinching joy but it is also a moment filled with profound grief.

Perhaps at other times and in other places we will know the sheer, pure unadulterated joy. Where we know only Christ resurrected and not Christ crucified. When we find our hearts skipping like lambs, or binkyng bunnies.

But, that isn't this Easter. This Easter we find ourselves like Mary, staring a little deeper into the depths of our own despair and coming into the dawn of Easter Morning with those tendrils of grief and uncertainty still clinging to us, our hearts a little heavy.

And that's okay, because maybe that's how the first apostle - the first one sent to tell the whole good news - felt. That's how Mary might have felt when Jesus appeared to her, when she was the first to see the resurrected AND crucified Christ. And I think if Mary can feel like that, and can still carry the good news to the disciples and all the world, then I think we can feel like that too and know that God is big enough and loving enough to still call our name, and to gently lift our bowed heads, and to patiently tell us that there is a promise of better things ahead.

So I wish you every blessing this Easter, and I pray that you will know the joy of the resurrected Lord, even if your heart is still weighed down by the world.

Amen.

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